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SERIOUS DANGER!!! Zafira rust nightmare revealed by our Grumpy Old Mechanic!

Published: December 6, 2017

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Online version: <https://www.wheels-alive.co.uk/serious-danger-zafira-rust-nightmare-revealed-by-our-grumpy-old-mechanic/>



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If you drive an older Zafira, you NEED to read this.

Our Grumpy Old Mechanic reports...

Our Grumpy Old Mechanic avoids sensationalism but feels it important to reveal a safety-critical problem of which most Zafira owners/operators are almost certainly unaware...

Last week a very tidy-looking first generation ('A' Series) Vauxhall Zafira 2.0 DTi dating from late 2003 was brought in to our establishment to have the transmission oil changed, and for one or two other minor jobs.



The owner has had the car since it was almost new, and it has always been garage-maintained in accordance with Vauxhall service schedules, and using genuine Vauxhall parts. It has obviously been cared-for, with shining paintwork and a virtually unmarked interior.

At the time when he bought the vehicle, the Zafira was the compact 'people carrier' or MPV by which others were judged, and he talks enthusiastically of the car's amazing practicality in a variety of roles in family use.

However... When we removed the protective undershield from beneath the front of the car, in order to reach the transmission oil drain point, we were truly shocked to discover that the front sub-frame assembly, on which the front suspension arms are mounted, had disintegrated almost to the point of collapse.

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It appeared that the undershield had never previously been removed from the vehicle, or at least not for a very long time. In normal maintenance this isn't necessary (for example to carry out engine oil and filter changes), and during routine maintenance and MoT tests the corrosion damage would not have been evident. In any case MoT testers are not permitted to dismantle components nor remove an undershield like this (which, incidentally, takes approximately 20 to 30 minutes to unfasten and lower).

The undershield covers the whole of the underside of the front of the vehicle, so that the sub-frame is completely invisible. The shield also incorporates a felt-like insulating material which, when the shield is in place, is necessarily held against the underside of the sub-frame side members. Therefore, when this material gets wet in adverse weather conditions, it can't help but hold the moisture (plus road salt often found in this vicinity) against the sub-frame - on this car the rust marks from the rotten sub-frame were clearly visible on the upper side of the undershield.

My understanding is that Zafiras featured body shells incorporating much use of galvanised



steel – this probably explains why the bodywork on these cars usually looks very sound. However, the sub-frames are definitely NOT galvanised, with the result that once the paint coating is breached, structural disintegration of the mild steel is inevitable.

In this case the owner of the car was deeply moved and genuinely shocked when I advised him of the problem; he had often carried a full load of six/seven people over long distances in the car, and had been completely unaware of the potential danger lurking beneath his vehicle.

In fact the state of the sub-frame was so dire that in my opinion hitting a pothole, or even a minor road surface imperfection, could have resulted in sub-frame/suspension collapse, with consequences that could have been at the very least, extremely serious, if not fatal...

In this case the owner was keen to keep the car, so a new front sub-frame (costing nearly £400 but still made from mild steel!) was bought from Vauxhall and then comprehensively treated with anti-rust paint and wax protection, before we installed it.

We also made a point of removing, by cutting away with a craft knife, the edges of the undershield so that the sub-frame is now visible for inspection from below, and open to the air, to prevent moisture being held against the underside of the sub-frame. In addition the sub-frame can now more easily be re-treated with anti-rust products, and on a regular/frequent basis.

I know that I am a Grumpy Old Mechanic, but this is a serious safety issue, and for me the question remains, “How and why did a major company like General Motors (Vauxhall/Opel) build in such a serious design flaw?”. Surely the problem must have been discovered within the GM network at quite an early stage, if not thought about at the design stage. I am very surprised that affected vehicles were not recalled on a safety basis (or were they, and this car was somehow missed?!).

(Having said all that, built-in rust traps are not unique to Vauxhall; we have seen them on a host of other makes. Let’s also dispel the myth that modern vehicles don’t rust. Oh yes they



do – and in my garage we see them every day!).

This Vauxhall's owner is disappointed, disillusioned and angry. He loves the wonderful practicality and excellent fuel economy of his diesel-powered Zafira, but he couldn't believe the extent of this damage, and can't help thinking about what might have occurred had the suspension collapsed with a full load of people aboard. Indeed during the two weeks prior to us seeing the car it had covered more than 700 miles on long-distance trips, fully laden for much of that mileage. Had he not brought the car to us for a simple transmission oil change, almost certainly the problem would not have been spotted until the sub-frame fell apart, taking the suspension/steering with it...

Unsurprisingly, the owner has pledged never again to 'invest' in another modern Vauxhall (and, incidentally, nor will I). Okay, his car is certainly not new, but to have a hidden, very serious and potentially lethal rust trap like this emerge after just a few years is frankly awful.

This front sub-frame set-up applies to Zafira 'A' models from 1999 to 2005, but the Zafira 'B' series cars from 2005 seem also to use a similar arrangement.

IF YOU OWN A ZAFIRA MORE THAN JUST A FEW YEARS OLD I URGE YOU TO REMOVE THE FRONT UNDERSHIELD (OR GET YOUR MECHANIC/GARAGE TO DO IT FOR YOU) SO THAT THE STATE OF THE SUB-FRAME CAN BE ESTABLISHED. YOU COULD BE DRIVING A POTENTIAL DEATH TRAP YET BE UNAWARE OF IT... YES, THIS IS THAT SERIOUS.